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Paid Family Leave Bill Advances

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TRENTON — A proposal to allow workers take six weeks of paid leave to care for a newborn child or sick relative advanced in a Senate committee Monday, and this time supporters believe they have the right formula to push the long-sought benefit into law.

While an effort to approve a similar measure stalled last year, Senate Majority Leader Stephen M. Sweeney, D-Gloucester, believes the latest version, which includes less time off and more protections against fraud, has enough compromises to win approval in both houses of the Legislature.

Sweeney's bill won a narrow 8-6 victory in the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, overcoming opposition from business groups who said that even a modified plan would give workers more incentive to take time away from the job and particularly hurt small businesses who cannot afford to lose personnel.

New Jersey would become the third state, after California and Washington, to offer paid family leave. Workers would pay for the program through a payroll tax that would cost an estimated \$33 a year.

"California has not fallen into the Pacific Ocean. Their economy has not crashed," Sweeney said, in response to fears about the impact on business.

Supporters said the plan will help employees care for their families in times of need. Under existing law, workers can take up to 12 weeks of time off for family medical emergencies or new births, but without pay.

The New Jersey proposal would let employees earn up to two-thirds of their salary, up to \$524 a week, for the first six weeks off. Sweeney hopes to see the bill approved by early March and said he has worked with Assembly Speaker Joseph J. Roberts Jr., D-Camden, who opposed the previous version of the bill.

"The speaker is committed to moving paid family leave rather quickly. I think we're as close as we're going to be," Sweeney said.

Roberts has said paid family leave will be approved at some point. He could not be reached for comment after Monday's vote.

Gov. Jon S. Corzine supports paid family leave and would sign the bill, said his spokeswoman, Lilo Stainton.

Business leaders said that with gloomy economic forecasts, now is not the time to approve a new benefit.

"While Congress is working to help business weather this economic time, New Jersey's debating a proposal to make it more difficult for employers by imposing a huge new mandate," said Philip Kirschner, president of the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

Gaytana Pino, the owner of a 10-person business in Cherry Hill, said she already lost a manager last year for three months of maternity leave. Another six weeks "would have created an impossible situation," said Pino, who runs the Paper and Ribbon Supply Co., which provides ink and equipment for printing.

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